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Introduction

This book is about religion in Java – its diverse forms, controversies, and reconciliations; more abstractly it is about cultural difference and syncretism. At a time when anthropology is increasingly preoccupied with cultural pluralism in the West, and with the challenges to personal identity, mutual tolerance, and social harmony that it presents, the example of Java reminds us that some of the more ‘traditional’ societies have been dealing with similar problems for quite some time. The varieties of Javanese religion are, of course, well known, thanks to a number of excellent studies. In what follows, however, my chief interest is in the *effect* of diversity upon Javanese religion. In looking at the mutual influences of Islamic piety, mysticism, Hinduism, and folk tradition upon each other, and at their different compromises with the fact of diversity, I hope to give a credible and dynamic account of how religion works in a complex society.

The setting for this book – Banyuwangi in the easternmost part of Java – is particularly appropriate to such an enterprise. In the standard view of things, the various forms of Javanese religion are unevenly distributed among village, market, court/palace, and town. Although most communities contain orthodox Muslims as well as practitioners of other tendencies (Koentjaraningrat 1985: 318), a rough spatial separation along religious and cultural lines (or a polarization within the most heterogeneous villages) has, allegedly, been characteristic of Java from the early years of the century (Jay 1963), though the sharpness of divisions has fluctuated with political developments. In rural Banyuwangi, however, typically we find pantheistic mysticism, spirit cults, and normative piety coexisting in great intimacy within a single social framework. The perennial Javanese problem – how to get on with

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people of a different religious persuasion – is an everpresent factor in daily life.

In doing justice to this sort of complexity, anthropology still has much to learn. Fredrik Barth, writing of Bali, goes so far as to claim that ‘We still do not know how to go about describing complex civilizations’ (1993: 3). This is partly, no doubt, because our time-honoured methods of symbolic analysis and descriptive integration have, for the most part, grown out of the experience of living in simple societies, among people for whom, as W. Stanner memorably put it, life is a ‘one possibility thing’ (Bellah 1969: 272). Yet, increasingly, the ‘field’ – whether it be a city quarter or a once-remote tribal domain – is characterized by a loose and often paradoxical relation between religious forms and social realities. Where once our task was to reveal the depths behind apparently simple forms, we now have to grapple with diversity, inconsistency, eclecticism, even incoherence.

So how to go about it? In *Balinese worlds*, Barth sets out the case that local variation is intrinsic to ‘traditional civilization’ and should therefore form the object of enquiry instead of being regarded as a mere difficulty to be overcome (1993: 4). In Banyuwangi, however, as in much of rural Java, one need not stray beyond the village boundaries to find evidence of striking cultural variation: the diversity found in one small neighbourhood is replicated in other corners of the same community, and so on into the next village. As in Bali, the problem facing the anthropologist is one of variation but not (or not essentially) one of *local* variation. In rural Banyuwangi, difference is constructed within the same space, and thus with greater intensity. The pious Muslim, when he rolls out his prayer mat in public view, is all too aware of his next-door neighbour who sits on the front doorstep pointedly ignoring the call-to-prayer. The group of mystics who gather in the evenings to expatiate in loud voices on the meaning of this or that do so in allusions which seem designed to trouble, but not quite offend, more orthodox auditors on the other side of the bamboo wall. And the visitor to the local shrine during the fasting month takes a devious route with her basket of offerings, equally anxious about the blessing she seeks and the criticism she must avoid. The outcome of all this busy ritual activity, mystical speculation, and competitive piety is quite unlike the situation prevailing in neighbouring Bali. Instead of the ‘disorder, multiplicity, and underdeterminedness’ that Barth finds in Bali (1993: 5), and which he believes characterizes social life in general, the picture in Java (at least in the portion that concerns us here) is of a studiously crafted order, harmonization, and

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overdeterminedness – an intricate and elegant structure built upon a history of violence and disorder.

As we shall see, this solution to the problem of diversity calls for a certain ingenuity, both practical and intellectual, and an unremitting, though habitual, effort. It is a solution at once durable and delicate, depending on a continuing balance of interests.

In characterizing this state of affairs one hesitates to use the word ‘syncretism’ since this usually implies a substantial merging of types, with a loss of their separate identities: something that cannot be presumed in the Javanese case. Following Stewart (1995), however, I use this term in a more abstract sense to refer to a systematic interrelation of elements from diverse traditions, an ordered response to pluralism and cultural difference. We shall see that this interrelation need not imply or lead to fusion; the Javanese case is rather more complicated than that. Particular traditions – mystical, Islamic, folk – which are themselves hybridized, enter into further combination in ritual and religious discourse; and the nature of these higher combinations in turn affects their several constitutions. Syncretism, in this sense, refers to a dynamic, recursive process, a constant factor in cultural reproduction, rather than to a settled outcome. As Stewart (1995: 26) suggests, seen in this light it is a concept which directs our attention towards ‘issues of accommodation, contest, appropriation, indigenization and a host of other dynamic intercultural processes’.

Such processes are, of course, historically situated; and syncretic forms are liable to reconfiguration and re-evaluation in the light of changing socio-political tensions (Hefner 1995; Shaw and Stewart 1994). History thus has a role in disentangling the various strands and in identifying shifts of meaning and relative power over time. But if the historical background is important, its precise relevance to the present is not always easy to establish. Javanese syncretism may have its roots in the past, but it is not simply an effect of the past, still less a concrete thing which persists through cultural inertia. Its significance lies in a combination of immediate factors (the position of Islam, the nature of the village community, norms of association, etc.) and the present arrangements would quickly unravel were these to change.

If history can take us only so far in explaining the complexity of the present, an alternative would be to explain the divisions and recombinations of Javanese religion at the level of ordinary everyday action. This is broadly the approach taken by Barth in his Balinese study. Barth’s Balinese are confronted by ‘a surfeit of cultural materials and ideational

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possibilities ... from which to construct reality' (1993: 4). They are engaged in a ceaseless struggle to make sense of the flow of events and in doing so draw on diverse traditions and epistemologies. Characters in search of a culture, one might say. Javanese persons, it seems to me, do not stand outside their 'worlds' in quite the same way. Like Balinese, they move between different 'interpretative paradigms' – they may, for example, see the 'same' illness or misfortune variously in terms of sorcery, germs, fate, or a mystical imbalance (to adapt one of Barth's examples, pp. 266–7). But the triumph of one particular account over rival versions is rarely a matter of deciding which makes better sense. Abstractly considered, a ghost, a ritual mistake, or a sorcerer's missile may be to blame, but when the sufferer ponders the cause of his illness it is other, non-cognitive, factors present in the situation that usually determine which paradigm he adopts. He may not have the authority to pronounce a diagnosis; or he may take into account the expectations and prejudices of his companions. Less obviously, the way the illness is experienced and presented may presume what kind of explanation is possible. Indeed, the experience may in itself constitute a kind of explanation. Diversity, in the sense of choice, may in some cases be an ethnographic illusion, an outsider's construction. The general point is that an interpretation is *part of* the world that actors construct and is inevitably subject to a range of social constraints; it is not something distinct from the world as experienced or as told.

An approach that would seek to explain cultural diversity at the level of ordinary, everyday action must always reckon with the problem of how action is culturally framed. Case histories do not provide a way round it. Far from being the eye-witness accounts of a participant, they must always rely, in part, on informants' commentaries and asides, often filtered through translation and reflecting various interpretative traditions. They draw on discourse rather than the raw data of human action.

If the nexus between culture and action is difficult to specify and perhaps (posed in these terms) chimerical, one way out of the difficulty is simply to grasp the nettle and focus explicitly on discourse and ritual – culture in its coercive and normative aspect. But this would have the reverse effect of minimizing cultural difference and masking the human variety and inventiveness which Barth rightly seeks to capture. If ethnography is to be true to experience (ours as well as others') it must deal with the paradoxical fact that, while largely constrained in what we do, and all too predictable with it, we nevertheless feel ourselves to be, in important ways, free. Indeed, a tension between freedom and constraint,

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at an experiential level, lies at the heart of social life. In this book I therefore try to steer a middle course between an individuals-in-action perspective and a reductive sociocentric framework. Rather than focusing on events and the interpretative paradigms in which they are cast, or on inexorable structures of power, I look at how people think their traditions, how they conceive the ideas by which they feel compelled. And I suggest that although our 'worlds' are largely constructed for us by others, and our interpretations are moulded by factors partly beyond our ken, the availability of different perspectives occasionally permits a creative space in which to manoeuvre – a space in which, minimally, we can become conscious of our predicament as social beings endowed with will. Javanese themselves allow for this possibility in what they call the 'rubbing together' of ideas in debate – a creative friction out of which arise unexpected things.

An analysis of the relation between ritual and ideology in a culturally plural setting must therefore take dominant ideas seriously *as ideas*, not merely as signs of social processes. This is, after all, to take account of what matters to our hosts as they see it. Hence, a central concern in what follows is with how ideas emerge, become accepted, and gain force among their adherents. Since we are dealing with diversity within a common structure, we must also ask why some ideas and ways are rejected, what sorts of hedges and defences are built around people's mental habits, and how people manage to conjure with differing, often contradictory, values and concepts. Such questions are germane to any social setting, of course, but they are given a peculiar salience and explicitness in a setting characterized by religious and ideological diversity. A conventional symbolic analysis or exegesis-of-the-informant's-exegesis is not really adequate to answer questions of this kind. We must move in closer to convey the *texture* of thought as well as its form and content, because style and manner register important factors such as authority, censorship, indeterminacy, and compromise.

These considerations have a bearing on the reporting of ethnography and influence the way we apprehend the material. In the present case, key topics – the definition of God from pantheistic and monotheistic perspectives, the foundation of ethics, the evaluation of rival interpretations, the locus of meaning – are presented not as settled matters, simple alternatives, but as contested issues, often in the form of argument. Only thus can one begin to appreciate the texture of cultural debate and the compelling force of particular ideas. Hence, in and among the ethnographic description will be found dialogues on the existence of the

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external world (is it independent of us, does it exist in the perceiving?), on the nature of the Koran as revealed or humanly invented, and even on the problems modern birth control poses for a theory of reincarnation.

A recurrent theme (reflecting a Javanese concern) is on modalities of expression: the said and the unsaid, ambiguity, suppression and irony, unequal discourses. We see how religious expression is continually given shape and emphasis – or, alternatively, is muted – by relations of power. For this reason, the wider political context – the imprint of state policy and propaganda, the dominant position of Islam, and the background of political violence – is a constant point of reference throughout the book. Indeed, home-made meanings and local solutions to the problems of diversity cannot be understood apart from cultural politics.

I have outlined the general approach adopted in this book. Let me now give an indication of its contents. Chapter 2 concerns the *slametan*, a ritual meal whose format draws on – ideally, encompasses – all the religious variants described later in the book. Centred on a synoptic ritual, this chapter serves as a thematic introduction as well as picturing what Javanese religion would look like as a whole, *if it were a whole*. Since the slametan is the central rite of popular religion, much depends on its characterization. Is it Islamic, animistic, or a relic of the Indic period of Javanese history? I examine the rival claims and explain how people of different orientation come together in ritual, and how mystical, Islamic, and indigenous traditions combine in a temporary synthesis. I show how symbols in an ideologically diverse setting work as common denominators, focusing diverse interests, and how their combination in ritual is the recipe for syncretism. The rest of the book then picks apart this synthesis: each variant is discussed with a view to how it relates to the others.

The next two chapters are about regional cults and their compromises with Islam. Chapter 3 concerns the *barong*, a popular drama in which performers are possessed by the village guardian spirit. This village spirit is the object of a complex of practices – protective rites, divination, healing – which persist in the shadow of Islam. By looking at a barong performance we can understand something of how indigenous tradition is both conceived and represented. We see how, at the climax of the show, autochthonous power erupts onto the stage, yet its significance is withheld – literally masked – from the audience. At the heart of the drama is an absence of meaning, a vacuity which draws attention both to itself and to the religious and political pressures which account for it. In

pursuing the broader significance of the drama – which seems to lie in a bloody and repressed past – I trace the history of the barong troupe and show how a politically disadvantaged group has managed to retain control of a key religious institution.

Chapter 4 depicts a different kind of compromise with Islam and the modern state. The shrine of a semi-legendary sage who was adviser in the Hindu kingdom of Blambangan (the setting of modern Banyuwangi) serves as a haven of non-Islamic religiosity – a religiosity which is more or less legitimate though limited to a muted symbolic expression. In the cult of the sage can be glimpsed the predicament of modern Javanists and their poignant efforts to recover a vanished past.

A long and pivotal chapter (5) is devoted to practical Islam, that is, Islam as it is conceived and practised in contrast to and alongside the other religious variants. The pious Muslims introduced in this chapter are not the dogmatic puritans known to Javanese ethnography through the works of Geertz, Peacock, and Nakamura: stern, God-fearing types (the Javanese, that is) who cleave to their mosques and disdain contact with the irreligious masses. In rural Banyuwangi – as in much of Java – the pious have kept faith with tradition, living intermingled with the not-so-pious in what is an uncharted middle ground of Javanese religion. Contrary to the familiar picture of Islam in Java, I show village faith to be ritualistic, practice-oriented, and undogmatic – characteristics explained by the ideologically mixed setting. The emphasis of the chapter is on portraying what ordinary Muslims, as opposed to experts, make of their faith: how they conceive of merit, the purpose of worship, the nature of revelation, and so on.

Javanese mysticism, in its practical rural guise, only makes sense when set against the predominance of Islam; hence my discussion of this subject follows the chapter on Islam. Most accounts of Javanese mysticism derive from literary sources and courtly or urban informants. This is one of the first accounts to show how mysticism is embedded in rural religious life, revealing a surprising sophistication and a distinctive symbology.¹ I discuss mystical and philosophical concepts as formulated and practised by villagers, ethical ideas, and compromises with pious Muslims. I try to convey something of the wit and ingenuity of mystical debate and the peculiar ironies of the mystics' coexistence with the dominant faith. Chapter 7 continues in this vein with the story of a mystical sect based in rural Banyuwangi. I discuss links with the cult described in chapter 4 and show how the sect represents both a response to the rise of Islam and a flowering of Javanist ideas.

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Chapter 8 brings us full circle. It concerns a village of mixed Muslims and Hindu converts in south Banyuwangi and shows how, among certain groups, the syncretist compromise with orthodox Islam has been broken. Faced with a narrower definition of Islam, following the 1965 coup, and greater pressure to conform to an official faith, a minority of nominal Muslims in this area (as in south-central Java and other Javanist strongholds) took the radical step of turning to Hinduism. Many others took the opposite course and opted for a strict Muslim piety (Hefner 1987). Conversion to Hinduism represented only one aspect of a wider process of cultural redefinition, as large numbers of Javanese – whether mystics, nominal Muslims, or followers of pre-Islamic faiths such as the Tengger people of East Java – were forced to question the nature of their traditional compromise with Islam (Cederroth 1995, Hefner 1985, Lyon 1980). In this chapter I outline the construction of a translocal Hinduism, its relation to Balinese Hinduism and Java's Hindu-Buddhist past, and the ingenious efforts of practitioners to ground Indian concepts in Javanese village life. I trace the background of the Hindu movement in the political upheavals and mass murder of the 1960s and identify a differential pattern of conversion (and regression to Islam) among native Banyuwangi folk and immigrants from elsewhere in Java.

The sequence of topics thus leads up to and then away from Islam, giving it a centrality which reflects its pervasiveness in Javanese concerns. Islam is not simply one option among many: it is a constant factor, albeit differently felt and appreciated according to personal history and predilection. There are those who live somewhat nervously on the hitherside, within its shadow, perhaps looking up to it as an unattainable or unattractive ideal, and those (described in the latter part of the book) who claim to have gone 'beyond' it. Nevertheless, all (except of course Hindu converts) identify themselves as Muslims. Crucially, all inhabit the same social space: we are not dealing with distinct groups but with diversity in a common social and cultural framework. What I have therefore tried to capture – despite the necessity of simplifying and separating for descriptive purposes – is the interrelation between the different orientations, the sympathies and hostilities, affinities and evasions that help to define each variant in relation to its rivals. (It is hard to avoid the word tradition, but I am speaking of something less distinct and concrete.) In this interrelation lies the unity of the subject – and, I hope, of the book.

One publisher's reader has pointed out that 'wittingly or unwittingly' I have echoed the sequence of Clifford Geertz's classic study, *The religion*

of Java, which begins with a slametan and then proceeds to analyse folk tradition, orthodox Islam, and mysticism. Clearly my reasons for adopting a similar structure, as set out above, are quite different from Geertz's. I conceive of the variant forms in rather different terms – more relationally, less identified with particular groups, and in a single social context quite unlike the disparate, semi-urban setting of Geertz's field-work. Unlike some of his critics, however, I agree with Geertz that Javanese religion can best be grasped from three contrasting vantage points and in adopting a similar structure (and, no doubt, certain other insights) I am happy to acknowledge a debt to a seminal work – whether wittingly or unwittingly incurred I am no longer sure.

Having sketched the plan of the book and outlined its thematic scope we can now move in closer to the field location and attempt to answer the question of where it fits in Java's cultural map.

A region in Javanese ethnography

The history of Java's great kingdoms has tended to overshadow that of its outlying regions. When we think of classical Java, what comes to mind are the early Indianized states with their great stone temples and epic statuary or the Muslim courts with their brilliant arts and ceremonies. Yet in the far east of the island existed a realm which, in its various incarnations, outlasted them all. Blambangan was the most enduring – in fact the last – Hindu-Buddhist realm in Java and the last region to fall under Dutch colonial rule.

Like a miniature Poland, its history was shaped by its unfortunate position between two powerful neighbours. To the east lay Hindu Bali; to the west, in Java, a succession of expansionist Muslim states. Its contemporary cultural make-up reflects this hybrid, contested history: a language containing Old Javanese archaisms and Balinese loan words, a dance-drama spoken in High Javanese and accompanied by a Balinese orchestra, and a polyphonic religious life with its roots in the Indic period but permeated at every level by Islam.

Banyuwangi (or Blambangan, as it once was) may not be typical of Java; but it becomes ever harder to know what should count as typical as 'new' variations crystallize against the background of earlier generalizations. The cultural yardstick which was Central Java has shrunk somewhat in recent years. And as the ethnographic and historical evidence accumulates, Java appears less and less like a singular cultural category whose exceptions can be consigned to 'enclaves'. Ricklefs (1993a: 12) has even suggested that a pan-Javanese cultural or ethnic

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identity may not have had much significance until late in the island's history – perhaps as late as the seventeenth century. Indeed, the very idea of 'Java' has come to be seen as an artifact of political power, born out of the competition for legitimacy between Central Javanese court culture and colonial domination (Pemberton 1994). In this struggle, the idea of a culturally unified Java, centred on the palace, emerged as a rhetorical device, eliding or encompassing local differences – an answer to the colonial imperative of divide and rule. John Pemberton suggests that this rhetoric has been taken up by the New Order regime (post-1966) which has assiduously promoted 'tradition' in order to contain diversity and relegate it to the ineffectual level of local custom. By implication, to document this diversity is to join in complicity with the regime, or at least to fall into its cultural trap. The ethnographer – so the argument goes – should, rather, swim against the tide and expose the power relations underlying the unity-in-diversity propaganda. Pemberton's point is important, though it exaggerates the effectiveness of a centrist discourse. It is now recognized that even within the framework of the classical kingdoms, with their standardizing polities of 'exemplary centres' and imitative peripheries, each province had its distinct forms, its own political and cultural dialect (Sutherland 1973–4; 1975). As Ron Hatley (1984) has pointed out, there have always been 'other Javas away from the *kraton* [palace]': regions distinguished from each other and from the courtly model by language, religion, arts, custom, 'character', even bodily posture and ways of carrying things. The difficulty for the analyst is to keep a sense of the tension between powerful cultural centres and their satellites, or, more generally, to develop an awareness of family resemblances. Yet, as Robert Hefner (1985) has shown, even the more isolated and divergent of groups, such as the Tenggerese of East Java, have maintained a centuries-old, mutually influential dialogue with the wider society. Hefner's pathbreaking study of Hindu–Muslim relations has obliged students of Java to reconsider their subject, and to recognize that the picture is not simply one of variety but of interpenetration and thematic variation.

The present work is about religion in a particular corner of Java but it is not conceived as a regional study – something which, for reasons already given, would no longer be tenable in conventional terms. Instead, it addresses themes and problems which are common to all of Java and, indeed, to much of South-east Asia. Rather than looking at regional differences and questions of local identity and ethnicity (matters of small interest to my hosts), I am concerned with broader questions of general